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ABSTRACT

In the gerontological literature, the term kinkeeping appears frequently in reference to activities such as visiting, telephoning, letter writing and mutual aid. A survey of 464 adults in Ontario found that over half could name someone in their extended family, usually female, who worked at keeping family members in touch. Siblings were often mentioned as kinkeepers, especially as people grew older and parents died. The succession of the kinkeeper role tended to pass from mother to daughter. Family continuity and caring seemed important to the respondents. The findings suggest that kinkeeping is as valuable to the young as to the old and results in a binding together of the generations. (JAC)

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# MAINTAINING INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS: KINKEEPING

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In a stratified random sample of people over the age of forty, whom we interviewed in Hamilton and Stoney Creek, Ontario, more than half the respondents indicated that there was someone in their extended family who could be considered to be a "kinkeeper", someone who works at keeping family members in touch with one another. In this paper we describe the work of kinkeeping as a position in the familial division of labour, and we examine the way in which the position is structured and the dynamics of occupancy of this position. We will argue the importance of kinkeeping as a social fact of contemporary family life, show that kinkeeping is primarily a female activity, describe the importance of sibling relationships in kinkeeping, and try to address the reasons why kinkeeping is so important an activity in family life.

Our data consist of interviews lasting, on average, 1.5 hours, with 464 men and women who participated in the Generational Relations and Succession Project based at McMaster University.[1] We have a great deal of data from these respondents, and their adult children, their parents and parents' in-law; but this paper is based solely on the major interview with the main sample[2] contacted during the study. In that interview we asked a number of direct questions about the possible existence within lineages or extended families of such positions as kinkeeper, comforter, ambassador, financial advisor, and head of the family.[3] This paper focuses on just one of these family positions, the kinkeeper.

In the gerontological literature, the term "kinkeeping" crops up quite frequently in reference to certain types of activities, such as visiting, telephoning, letter-writing, and mutual aid (Adams, 1968; Aldous, 1967; Bott, 1957; Shanas et al., 1968; Townsend, 1963; Young and Willmott, 1962). Whether the term "kinkeeping" or a phrase such as "maintaining kin relations"

is used, the concept of kinkeeping is usually inferred from investigation of specified activities such as those mentioned above, which provide data on visiting patterns, frequency of contact, residential patterns and residential proximity.

The theoretical literature in the sociology of the family leads us to expect that the work of kinkeeping would fall to female family members. Parsons (1955) and Zelditch (1955), for example, theorize that women, in the nuclear family, are leaders in the expressive domain and are concerned with group maintenance and integration. It follows that women would be expected to be specialists in kinship affairs. Text-books and overview articles on the family and the family of later life reveal the salience of women as links in kinship maintenance and relations (Abu-Laban, 1978; Lee, 1980; Morgan, 1975:66; N.I.H., 1979; Troll, 1971; Troll et al., 1979:99; Troll and Bengtson, 1979: 153). These conclusions are drawn from a wide variety of specific studies showing, for example, the key importance of the mother-daughter tie (Adams, 1968; Aldous, 1967; Gans, 1962; Lopata 1979; 1973; Watson and Kivett, 1973); the burden assumed by daughters in caring for elderly mothers (Tobin and Kulys, 1980; Treas, 1979), more visiting of parents by adult daughters than sons (Aldous, 1967), greater involvement of women than of men with kin (Adams, 1968; Aldous and Hill, 1965; Berardo, 1970; Komarovsky, 1964; Sweetser, 1963), the central part women play in orchestrating family gatherings and ritual occasions (Bott, 1957:135), and the strength of the sister-sister tie (Cumming and Schneider, 1961). Women are also found to be important as links or bridges between generations; for example, Hill and Associates, in their study of three-generation families, found women in the middle generation linked older and younger generations by maintaining close relations with their parents and their children (Hill et al., 1970: 62).

The female-dominance in kinkeeping in our kinship system is reflected in greater contact across female-linked generations and husbands often having more contact with their wives' parents. (Komarovsky, 1964; Leichter and Mitchell, 1967; Reiss, 1962). Studies which do not support this pattern are few (for example, Adams, 1968; Albrecht, 1962).

Kinkeeping is defined in our research as "keeping family members in touch with one another." Data are derived from a series of questions beginning:

> Thinking about your side of the family in the broadest terms-including your brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and so forth - is there currently any one person among you and your family who, in your opinion, works harder than others at keeping the family in touch with one another?

Family is, therefore, defined as extended family, on the respondent's side.

Our approach to investigating kinkeeping differs from previous attempts in several ways. We view kinkeeping structurally as a family task and leadership position. We take a direct but also an exploratory or open-ended measurement stance, asking about the existence of such a position, about who occupied it, duration of occupancy, how the occupant behaves in the position, and why the occupant started to assume the position. Finally, the investigation is not restricted to the parent-child relationship, but is addressed to the wider context of the extended family.

THE WORK OF KINKEEPING

We have found it useful to think of kinkeeping and similar family tasks as forms of work or as occupational positions in a familial division of labour. As such, the job of kinkeeping encompasses a variety of activities (see Table 1). Our question asked about keeping people in touch with one another, and it is perhaps not surprising that the most frequently mentioned

activity of kinkeepers is telephoning and writing family members, followed by visiting and organizing or holding family get-togethers.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Kinkeepers thus act as important communication links between family members.[4]

> I telephone and write letters to pass on news of different members of the family to members of the family. (6150)
>
> ***
>
> She urges us to write to each other and he writes to all of us. (3028)
>
> ***

But family members are not always grateful for kinkeepers' efforts. One woman said the kinkeeper in her family

> ...visits and drags us to visit. (4012)

Kinkeepers try to bring family members together, face-to-face. These occasions may be dinners or other get-togethers; over one-quarter of the responses included mention of this kind of activity. In addition, many of the respondents said the kinkeeper organized, promoted or hosted family reunions, and one-tenth mentioned special events such as picnics, birthdays, or anniversaries.

> I have them for dinner and invite them into my home. (4094)
>
> ***
>
> He has get-togethers for the family -- picnics and birthday parties. (5142)
>
> ***
>
> Every Christmas, she has a family reunion. (8223)

A few additional types of responses are interesting not because they are mentioned often, but because they hint at other types of tasks in the overall familial division of labour which might well be investigated in future studies. A few people specifically mentioned that the kinkeeper acted as the family genealogist. For example, one respondent said, "I am doing the family tree" (8043).

We suspect many families have someone who has in fact prepared a family tree and taken responsibility for keeping it up to date. Furthermore, many more families likely have someone who is considered the expert on the family tree, without having committed the knowledge to paper.

Another kinkeeping activity occasionally mentioned was acting as the family helper, problem-solver, mediator or conciliator. As one man said, "Problems get through to me through one of the family. I help by giving advice" (3114). One person was said to be "the first to offer help" (7190); another "gives advice when necessary" (5144); and one woman said she was the one to "...patch things up when there are squabbles" (6007).

Another theme which comes through in a number of responses suggests kinkeepers may provide links to a home and family the respondent has left behind, helping to counteract the weakening of ties through migration.

> She writes with all the news from Ireland about the family there. (4131)
>
> ***
>
> She gets the family together when I visit England. (7079)
>
> ***
>
> She writes me every week. Sends me papers. (4051)

The kind of kinkeeping activity engaged in varies somewhat according to the sex of the person doing the kinkeeping (see Table 1). Women are more likely than men to write or phone, although men, too, engage in quite a lot of this kind of activity. Men are slightly more likely to visit than women, while women engage in more activity to do with organizing or holding family gatherings. It is also interesting to note that problem-solving activity was usually done by male kinkeepers, while acting as the information centre was predominantly done by females. The importance of women in handling the flow of family information has been noted in the literature (Morgan, 1975:66).

The kinkeeping activity done by women is more extensive or complex than that done by men. When responses describing what the kinkeeper did were analysed to see the number of different activities coded for each response, two-thirds of the female kinkeepers were said to do two or more activities, while half of the male kin-keepers did only one.

A final point in this section on the work of kinkeeping is that the person who takes on the job of kinkeeper carries the responsibility for a very long time.

Respondents were asked for how many years the person named as kinkeeper had been doing this job. Answers ranged from one year to 75 years. The median was 20 years, with half the cases falling between ten and 30 years. It is striking that one-quarter of the kinkeepers were said to have been acting in this capacity for between 30 and 75 years.

People's family memories and knowledge of family history appear to span the decades with ease. Even the youngest respondents (that is, in the 40-54 age group) displayed this characteristic: when asked about the length of time the person named had been the kinkeeper, the median length of time

given by these respondents was 17 years. In a sense then, this position in the familial division of labour is more than a job; it is often a career.

FILLING THE POSITION

The half of our respondents who said there was someone in their family who worked harder than others at keeping family members in touch were asked who that person was. While our data are not detailed, we are able to draw some conclusions about the social correlates of persons who fill this position. 23 per cent of those who said there was a kinkeeper said this person was themself, and our information about these self-designations is more complete than for designations of others.

Table 2 provides information on which family member is designated kinkeeper, breaking this down by sex of the designee.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

For 6% of designations, we could not ascertain the sex of the designee. About three-fourths of kinkeepers named were women. We consider it a significant finding that the most frequently named class of relatives is siblings, at 51% of all designations.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Moreover, the number of siblings the respondent had bore a strong relationship to whether or not the respondent's family had a kinkeeper (Pearson's r = .232, p = .001 for women; for men, r=.175, p=.004) This is followed by female respondents designating themselves, accounting for 17% of all designations. Parents were named just 5.4% of the time, and children just 4.6% of the time. For all classes of relatives, females were far more likely to be named than males.

These data show a strong tendency for the kinkeeper to be a member of the respondent's own generation, a phenomenon which calls for explanation given the long duration or occupancy of this position noted earlier. Own generation kinkeepers are likely to be siblings or self-designations. The highest proportion of same generation designations is among respondents aged 55-69 (at 88%), the age category also most marked by self-designations.

For those who designate themselves as the kinkeeper, , increasing age was associated with a greater likelihood of describing the activities of the position as communications ones: writing letters, telephoning and visiting. Social convenor activities such as hosting family get togethers or reunions, are most likely to be named by people in their late fifties and sixties. For example, while fully two-thirds of women aged 55-69 who self-designated as kinkeeper described such social convenor activities, only 9% of those aged 70+ did so. We may reasonably assume that advanced age deprives many people of the energy to pursue social convenor activities. The great involvement of women in their late fifties and through their sixties in such activities sheds new light on the "caught generation" (Neugarten, 1979) or "sandwich generation" (Schwartz, 1979) and its familial burdens, and also provides support for the recently expressed view (e.g. Shanas, 1981) that the boundaries of the caught generation may extend well beyond the fifties into the decade of the sixties.

ACCESSION AND SUCCESSION

As a phenomenon of social structure, the position of kinkeeper may be said to persist in families with a duration longer than the lives of the position occupants. People can therefore be thought of as passing through the position.

This view leads us to ask what leads people into and out of the position of kinkeeper. Recall that we noted the long duration of position occupancy, but also the tendency for same-generation family members to be designated kinkeeper.

We asked respondents why the kinkeeper started to make the effort to keep the family in touch with one another. The most important reason given, by 27% of respondents, was to keep the family together; and the death or ill health of the previous kinkeeper was mentioned by 18% of respondents. General factors such as qualifications in terms of special talent or personality characteristics, having the time free to engage in kinkeeping activities, or having the interests or motivation accounted for the bulk of additional reasons.

Of those who said the kinkeeper took on the job to keep the family together, one-third indicated that the kinkeeper was responding to a specific event involving a realization that family continuity was somehow threatened. Often, this threat was the tendency to drift apart after a parent's death.

> She wanted to keep the closeness after my mother died. (3132)

***

> Wants to keep family together. Did not want it to fall apart when parents died. (3148)

The death of a family member always poses a threat to family continuity and "is the source of an immediate and observable disruption" (Bengtson, 1979). Death is particularly disruptive when it happens to a person who acted as a link between family members--in other words, a person who acted as kinkeeper. The death of a parent, especially a mother, can be particularly threatening to sibling relationships; resulting in lowered rates of interaction between

siblings (Young and Willmott 1962; Adams, 1968; Rosenberg and Anspach, 1973). Parents not only link adult siblings, but also provide inter-generational links between the adult child and other kin of the parent's generation.

Sometimes kinkeeping begins as a response to a general sense that the family is drifting apart.

> My family was drifting apart and I didn't want that to happen. (4080)

***

> Because we were getting far apart, pretty well ignoring one another. (6058)

In other cases, the event is in the distant past, but it gave the kinkeeper a sense of the importance of maintaining family solidarity.

> Because we were raised by the Children's Aid in foster homes and I assumed the mother role. We had to have some closeness and a sense of family, even though we lived in different homes. My sisters always turned to me and still do. (6007)

Intermarriage may pose a threat to family solidarity, leading to special efforts to keep the family together.

> My younger brothers married non-Italian girls and they started drifting away and it was important to me to try to keep us together. (4156)

Geographical mobility or migration is another kind of threat:

> During the war we were all in the services and got separated, all going our own way. Later some of us came to Canada. She wanted to keep us closer together than we were, so she started writing us all about news of each other. She's a gem. (6113)

***

> She wanted to keep in touch with the family since we are away. (3071)

***

> family moved away. He wanted to keep them together. (5020)

The literature indicates that renewal of contact or heightened contact with family who are geographically distant is common in later life (Weishaus, 1979). For example, Troll and Associates observe:

> With the advent of old age, many older people seek to pick up old family loyalties and renew old relationships. More effort may be made to visit siblings, even at great distances, after retirement ... than in middle age. (Troll et al., 1979:123)

Sometimes the respondent's own mortality is understood to threaten the passing on of family knowledge. In this example the respondent, who is 74 years old, and her sister realize that unless they do something to ensure their family knowledge will be transmitted to the next generation, such knowledge may die with them.

> We got talking and realized we were the last generation to know where we came from and so we should record our ancestry. (8018)

These examples suggest that kinkeeping becomes more salient in response to a range of specific threats to family solidarity, threats which tend to increase with movement through the family life course. Our respondents, in focusing on the kinkeeping activities of themselves or of generational peers may simply be unaware of the fact that similar threats to family solidarity have been countered by their predecessors and are beginning to be met by their successors.

In addition to kinkeeping which developed as a response to a threat to family solidarity, another one-tenth of our respondents include a general reference to a desire for closeness as a reason the kinkeeper began his or her activities.

Close to one-fifth of the respondents said the kinkeeper had taken over the job from a parent. Female respondents were two and one-half times as likely as male respondents to give this explanation of the origins of the kinkeeper's taking on the job. Furthermore, close to nine-tenths of the kinkeepers who took over the job from a parent were women.

This suggests that women have a stronger sense than men of the continuity of this position, and are more likely to perceive it as being passed from mother to daughter - that is, down the family line.

> She took over this role as my parents became older and were not able to do this. (4055)
>
> ***
>
> She was the oldest one at home when my mother died and she seemed to take over then. (6120)
>
> ***
>
> My mother used to do this so after she died I took on the job. (6150)
>
> ***
>
> I was the only girl and I felt I was taking mother's place. (8068)

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have demonstrated that kinkeeping is a social fact in contemporary families. Most people identified someone as holding this position in their families, either at the present or in the past, and were able to describe various aspects of this job including duration of occupancy, reasons for taking on the job, and the nature of activities and responsibilities attached to the position.

This area of family work is dominated by females, who are depended upon to do the work of keeping family members in touch with one another. The fact that respondents so often mention siblings as people who perform the task of

trying to keep family members in touch reflects these respondents' perception of just where the problem of keeping family members in touch lies. By naming siblings, respondents reveal that it is these ties with siblings and their siblings' children that become problematic as people grow older and especially after parents die.

When children are young, family activities naturally include parents and children - or, from the children's point of view, parents and siblings. As families age, and children leave home, parents may still act as a centre of gravity around which family activities occur. Whether or not grown sisters and brothers consider their relationships to be based on obligation or choice, the mere fact that parents are alive and organize or act as a focal point for family activities may be sufficient to ensure that siblings continue to have contact with one another in a family context.

These data suggest that, in many families, the parents do act as a bonding agent, holding siblings, and perhaps other relatives, in place. In most families, however, there comes a time, a turning point, when there is a realization that something must be done if the family that is, the broader family including siblings, their spouses and children is not to drift apart. This turning point often occurs following the death of a parent.

This increased sense of responsibility for maintaining family ties after the loss of a parent is perhaps reinforced by a tendency in many people to place increasing importance on family ties as the years go by (Bengtson, 1979).

The succession of the kinkeeper job from one generation to the next, in the general case, seems to descend through the female line, from mother to one of her daughters. Males also engage in kinkeeping, but not to the same degree.

People work at family continuity. There comes a time when they realize that it is up to them, it's their turn to take up the torch. People have a sense of the family's fragility and assume responsibility for trying to keep a sense of "the family" alive in its members.

It is by now well established that the family is a primary source of services for its elderly members (Marshall, Rosenthal and Synge, 1981; Sussman, 1976; Tobin and Kulys, 1980). Our analysis suggests something more than this. Families seem to be terribly important to most of their members, providing them with a source of continuity and meaning. While continuity and meaning are or can be provided for its members by the family, we would suggest that many people gain these rewards from the very work they do to make the family work for them. Kinkeeping is surely a task to which many or most family members devote some attention; but so important is this task that a majority of families have developed a specialized position to make sure that it gets done.

It would carry us well beyond our data to suggest that a family must have a kinkeeper, or even that a family must have a kinkeeper to function well by some criteria of wellness. What we do know however is that many families do have kinkeepers as recognizable specialists in their communications areas. That so many families have this specialty and that position occupants work so hard at kinkeeping tasks testifies to the value of family life to people today.

Finally, to place this analysis within the framework of aging and the life course, we have shown that families may in the normal course of events expect certain age-related dynamics to increase the salience of or the demand for kinkeeping activities, while affecting the abilities of kinkeepers to fulfill the communications function within their families. As a result, as family

members grow old together, as older members die and new members join the family, there is a giving up of kinkeeping activity by the very old and an assumption of the work of kinkeeping by a member of the younger generation within the family. The net result of such activity is perhaps of as much value to the young as to the old, this result being a binding together of the generations.

## FOOTNOTES

1. The Generational Relations and Succession Project (GRASP) is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through grant no. 492-79-0076-R1. Additional support has been provided by the National Health Research Development Program of Health and Welfare Canada through a National Health Scientist award to Victor Marshall, and by the Office on Aging, McMaster University. Invaluable staff support has been provided by Brenda Nussey, and by Christine Davis and Margaret Denton of Social Data Research Ltd. We are particularly grateful to the many people who were interviewed or who completed questionnaires for the study.

2. To obtain 464 completions we attempted to contact 1081 persons, drawing new cases randomly as needed. Despite the fact that the population listing was the current year's property assessment tape, used for current property tax billings, we could not locate 117 persons, of whom 30 were known to be deceased and 68 known to have moved. This left 964 contacted persons, of whom 116, or 12%, were found to be ineligible for the study because they could not speak or write English well enough to be included (we did not provide translators). Subtracting language ineligibles leaves a total of 848 eligible contacted persons, from which base we calculate the following rates: 12% excluded because their own health was too poor or they were preoccupied with the ill health or death of another family member; 33% refusal; 55% completion. Streib (1980) has recently called attention to the "excluded 20%" of the aged -- particularly the very old -- who are not interviewed in community studies of the aged. Our study undoubtedly under-represents the bedfast and the very ill elderly, and only five cases were interviewed in nursing homes or homes for the aged. This study therefore represents community-dwelling persons who, even if many are quite old, tend to be in reasonably good health. The social class spread of the sample is indicated by the fact that 25% earned $8,000 or less, while 22% earned $25,000 or more, yearly. More than half the respondents listed British as their main ancestry, and the next largest groups (Irish, Italian and German) were listed by 7% or less of respondents.

3. A preliminary analysis of the other family positions is found in Rosenthal, Marshall and Synge, 1980. The position, "head of the family" is analyzed in Rosenthal, Marshall and Synge, 1981. For a comprehensive analysis see Rosenthal's forthcoming doctoral dissertation, 1981.

4. The numbers following verbatim responses refer to individual respondents. The first digit codes an age and sex category, as follows: 3= males age 40-54; 4= females age 40-54; 5= males age 55-69; 6= females age 55-69; 7= males age 70+; 8= females age 70+. These were the categories within which we drew a stratified random sample.

TABLE 1 ACTIVITIES OF KINKEEPER, BY SEX OF DESIGNATED KINKEEPER

| Kinkeeping Activity | Percent of kinkeepers who do each activity (non-exclusive categories) Male Kinkeepers | Female Kinkeepers | All Kinkeepers |
|---|---|---|---|
| Telephones | 39.2 | 49.7 | 47.3 |
| Writes | 37.2 | 45.6 | 43.7 |
| Visits | 35.2 | 26.5 | 28.5 |
| Organizes or holds get-togethers | 15.6 | 24.2 | 22.3 |
| Organizes reunions, special events, holiday and birthday celebrations | 13.7 | 14.4 | 14.2 |
| Information Center | 1.9 | 6.3 | 5.3 |
| Link- in touch with everyone, or link with home, old country | 5.8 | 4.6 | 4.9 |
| Other | 15.5 | 9.5 | 10.9 |
| N = | 51 | 173 | 239* |

*includes uncodable by sex = 15

TABLE 2 WHO IS THE FAMILY KINKEEPER?

| Relationship to Respondent | Percent of Kinkeepers Who Are: Male | Female | Uncodable for sex |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sibling | 9.6 | 39.3 | 1.6 |
| Respondent | 5.8 | 17.1 | .4* |
| Parent | .8 | 4.6 | |
| Child | 1.6 | 2.9 | |
| Other relatives** | 2.0 | 9.6 | 4.1 |
| | 19.8 | 73.5 | 6.1 |
| N = | 51 | 173 | 239 |

* Respondent and spouse
** Includes aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, spouse.

TABLE 3 GENERATIONAL LOCATION OF KINKEEPER, BY AGE AND GENERATION OF RESPONDENT

| Age of Respondent | Generational Location of Kinkeeper: Younger Generation than Respondent % | Same Generation as Respondent % | Older Generation than Respondent % | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 70+ | 17.3 | 79.7 | 2.8 | 69 |
| 55-69 | 4.8 | 87.9 | 7.2 | 83 |
| 40-54 | 0 | 78.5 | 21.4 | 84 |

Uncodable = 3 N=236

Chi Square = 31.59 df = 2 Sign. = .001 Cramer's V= .26

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